

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING ON RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM IN TURKEY

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216 Hart Senate Office Building
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P A R T I C I P A N T S

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Tony Perkins, Chair

Gayle Manchin, Vice Chair

Kristina Arriaga, Commissioner

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR PERKINS: Good morning and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing on "Religious Freedom in Turkey." I would like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us today to offer their expertise and recommendations, and I would also like to especially thank Senator Thom Tillis of North Carolina and his office for providing this room for us this morning.

By way of introduction, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF as it is known, is an independent bipartisan U.S. government commission that was created in 1998 in the International Religious Freedom Act. We are bipartisan, and I don't know if you watched the congressional baseball game last night, but there was--yeah, there was friendship and camaraderie on the field between the two parties, but on this Commission we all wear the same jersey, and it is the jersey of religious freedom, and I am honored

to be serving with my colleagues.

The Commission monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad, using international standards to do so, and makes policy recommendations to Congress, to the President, and to the Secretary of State. Now, today, USCIRF, as we gather here for this hearing, is exercising its statutory authority under the International Religious Freedom Act to convene this hearing.

Now earlier this year, USCIRF issued its 20th Annual Report, marking two decades of the Commission's work in monitoring freedom of religion or belief and advising the U.S. government.

Now that report documents religious freedom violations and progress during the calendar year of 2018 in 28 different countries. This includes the country of Turkey, where USCIRF noted deteriorating religious freedom conditions.

Turkey has long been home to diverse ethnic and religious communities, including the

Armenian Apostolic, the Baha'is, Bulgarian Orthodox, the Chaldean Catholics, the Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witness, Jewish, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Syriac Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, and many others.

It is also home to the region's first Atheism Association. However, the government has long exerted undue influence and control over religious communities in its Directorate of Religious Affairs, which oversees the practice of Islam and the General Directorate of Foundations, which manages the activities of all other religious foundations.

The government has increasingly interfered in the internal affairs of religious communities. Examples of this include placing gratuitous conditions on the electoral process for religious leaders. Greek Orthodox metropolitans are required to obtain Turkish citizenship in order to participate in the church's Holy Synod, and since 2010, the government has prevented the Armenian

Apostolic Church from holding elections for the position of patriarch.

The government also has refused to recognize the country's largest religious minority, the Alevis, and denies recognition of their houses of gathering where they worship.

While the government has taken some positive steps to address religious property issues, including the restoration and opening of a Bulgarian Orthodox church, permission to build a new Syriac Orthodox church, and the return of 50 properties deeded to the Syriac Orthodox community, other problems continue to persist: the government has threatened to convert the Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque and it continues to prevent the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary from being reopened.

Let me now turn to my colleague, Vice Chair Gayle Manchin, to discuss Turkey's broader human rights environment and its effect on religious freedom.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you, Chair

Perkins, and good morning.

In recent years, we have witnessed poor human rights conditions in Turkey and notice that they continue to deteriorate amid government's efforts to purge political opponents and silence their critics.

The human rights situation has suffered in part due to the unchecked use of hate speech intended to further polarize an already divided society. State officials and politicians have repeatedly engaged in hate speech and anti-Semitism remarks targeting Turkey's Christian and Jewish population and have used accusations of minority ethnic or religious backgrounds as a slur to discredit their political opponents.

Most recently, as Istanbul prepared to repeat a controversial mayoral election, ranking officials in Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party accused the main opposition candidate and newly elected mayor, Ekrem Imamoglu, of "secretly" being Greek.

Even more disturbing have been recent manifestations of violence against members of Greek and Armenian communities. This past May, a Greek man was found murdered in his home with hands and feet bound.

That same month, an Armenian woman was attacked and stabbed repeatedly while the assailants were telling her "this is only the beginning." Two months before, her home had been vandalized with profanity and hate speech, and incidents such as these have given rise to a fear among these communities, and many have blamed the rhetoric of the government for the surge in these hate crimes.

To conclude the opening remarks, I now yield to my colleague, Commissioner Kristina Arriaga.

COMMISSIONER ARRIAGA: Thank you so much, Vice Chair Manchin. I shouldn't say she's my favorite Democrat, but she's definitely among the top three. We do work together well at the

Commission.

American citizens have also been impacted by deteriorating conditions in Turkey. Many of you are familiar with the case of Pastor Andrew Brunson. The first time I met Andrew Brunson, he was behind bars. I went to see him in Kiriklar Prison with another commissioner. We were the first delegation of non-relatives that was able to see him.

I had taken a picture with me, and when he walked in, he was a shadow of the man who had appeared in the picture. He had lost 50 pounds. He had been held in a cell meant for eight people with 20 other inmates. He had spent a year in prison already, and he had not even been charged.

The 63-page indictment came 18 months into his detention, and it was leaked to the press before it was given to his own attorney.

The indictment, among other things, said that Andrew Brunson associated with a gang of Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints

that taught English but in reality worked for the U.S. government, and the gang had a particular trait so they could be recognized: they were each missing a finger, but there were different fingers missing. If it were not so sad, it would be absurd and laughable.

Another accusation was that Andrew Brunson wanted to create an independent state of Kurdistan through the Christianization of Turkey's ethnic Kurdish population.

USCIRF actively advocated for Pastor Andrew Brunson through our Religious Prisoners Program. We also adopted--two of us adopted him, and we took turns going to his hearings. And in the last hearing in October, Commissioner Perkins went to the hearing, and I don't know how he managed, but he got an airplane to land in a commercial airport in Izmir and picked up Andrew and his wife. I'm sure that will make for a good side story.

Andrew Brunson sadly was convicted of his

crimes--so-called crimes--in Turkey, and that has put a chill in the entire Christian and minority community in Turkey.

In regard to the ongoing imprisonment, which is heartbreaking, of Americans and Turkish nationals that used to work for Americans, the U.S. Senate recently introduced bipartisan legislation, S. 1075, that seeks to address the political persecution of U.S. citizens and diplomatic staff.

On behalf of USCIRF, I look forward to hearing the witnesses' testimony and recommendations, including what steps the United States and Congress can take to encourage Turkey to reverse its downward trajectory on freedom of religion or belief.

It is my privilege to then introduce the panel. Chair Perkins.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Commissioner Arriaga.

I would like to turn to our first panel, and there certainly is a story behind Pastor

Brunson's release. There were many advocates for him, including the White House, the Vice President, but several members of Congress, one with us this morning, and I would like to first introduce Andrew Brunson, then Senator Tillis, who will make opening remarks, because he has another commitment he has to attend to.

We are familiar with Pastor Brunson. Pastor Brunson is an American pastor. Andrew and his wife Norine lived in Turkey for 23 years and were involved in starting churches, conducting training, providing aid to refugees, and ministering in a house of prayer.

In October of 2016, they were falsely accused of terrorism, and Andrew was held for two years in Turkish prisons. Due to a worldwide prayer movement and significant--significant--and I underscore that--political pressure from the U.S. government at all levels, he was finally sentenced to time served and dramatically released in October of 2018. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of

Aberdeen, Scotland.

Senator Tillis from North Carolina serves on several committees. I want to mention one that is of significance, but I'll first list the others. He's on the Armed Services Committee, the Veterans Affairs, the Banking and Housing and Urban Affairs Committee, as well as the Senate Judiciary Committee, but he is also the co-chair of the Senate Human Rights Caucus, and in that capacity, as well as a senator from North Carolina, the home state of Senator Brunson, Dr. Brunson, he advocated vigorously for him, and, again, we thank him for being with us today.

And Senator Tillis, thank you for being here.

SENATOR TILLIS: Thank you, Mr. Chair, Madam Vice Chair, Madam Commissioner.

I appreciate you all giving me an opportunity to speak. I do have a Judiciary Committee hearing markup that I'll be going back to, but it's not for a lack of interest and

continued involvement in this issue.

Earlier this week, my staff asked me if I wanted them to prepare opening comments for this. I said I think I've pretty much got this one.

I first want to thank by telling you how happy I am to have Andrew Brunson beside me. Like you, commissioner, the first time I met him was in a prison, and it was about a month or maybe six weeks after the indictment was issued. We were having a briefing on it. We'd been tracking the issue for several months and trying to work through diplomatic channels with the charge and the State Department. And I heard someone say that he believed that we would read the indictment, believe it, and turn our backs on him.

And that's when I had the opportunity to realize the wonder of being a U.S. senator. I said, well, then we got to go to Turkey, and I've got to look him in the eye and tell him that's the furtherest thing from the truth. And so we went and met with him, and I told him it was important

for him to know that we were going to be there, and we would not stop until he got released.

Then the trial came up a couple months later, and I decided to travel back to Turkey, and I spent 12 hours in that courtroom, and a Turkish courtroom could not be any further away from our jurisprudence in this country. In fact, when I came in here, it reminded me of that courtroom: three judges standing up above; the prosecutor more or less elevated to another judge; the defense attorney three times the distance of the stenographer away from her client; him seated right in the middle.

After an exhausting time in prison, after virtually no opportunity to prepare, he's then subjected to this concept of we think you're guilty, prove that you're innocent, and prove that you're innocent of what sorts of charges. Well, I'll give you one: his daughter happened to post on Facebook a meal that's enjoyed by millions, tens of millions of people there. But the indictment was

this is the sort of meal that the Gulenists support; therefore he must be a Gulenist.

There was another indictment from a witness in his church in Izmir, which I visited on my second trip over there, that someone witnessed a light on in the middle of the night. Well, if you go into this church, it's a very small church. I don't know, Pastor Brunson--seats maybe 150 people if you got standing room.

You go upstairs to this room, where the alleged nefarious activity of the light being on occurred. There's one problem: there's no window in this room. There's no way to see it from the outside. And then there was this secret room adjacent to it--about the size of a common walk-in closet--where all the planning for the coup and all the disruptive behavior that Senator Brunson was allegedly accused of participating in. There was nothing more than filing cabinets and the kinds of things that they need to carry on church activities.

And then you go to the church. This church in Izmir is a small humble church where the doors and the windows can be open for everybody to hear what's in there. And what at the end of the day Pastor Brunson was guilty of for nearly two decades is bringing the word of God to those who wanted to listen. That's it. End of story.

And, thankfully, in Pastor Brunson's case, he was released. He was actually incarcerated on October 7th of 2016. He was freed on October 12th of 2018. And I'm proud to say on October 15th in 2019, he will be opening the Senate as our guest chaplain to celebrate his year release, and we're looking forward to that, Pastor Brunson.

But ladies and gentlemen who are here in the audience and distinguished members of the panel, thank you for bringing attention to what I consider to be the complete absence of any respect for religious freedom in the country of Turkey as we know it today.

Since the coup, the freedom of the press

and freedom of religion are virtually nonexistent in this country. And the last thing that I will say, I'm happy that we worked together with the President, with Secretary Pompeo, with Ambassador Brownback, with over 70 U.S. senators who signed on to a letter.

We were unified. We had one jersey on, and that was a jersey to make sure that religious freedom is restored in Turkey and across the world in all these other countries that are represented today that have stories very much like Pastor Brunson's. So I appreciate the work that you're doing. Know that I stand with dozens of U.S. senators who will work with you to make sure that the stories that Pastor Brunson will tell today do not continue to repeat themselves.

And I will also continue to work with people in Turkey that as late as yesterday I got an update on that I know are being held for the same what I consider to be respectfully bogus reasons that Pastor Brunson was for nearly two years.

Thank you all for your work. Pastor Brunson, thank you for also letting me attend your daughter's wedding because she stood before the Human Rights Commission and said that she was getting married to her husband Kevin, who serves our country admirably, but she said I'm looking forward to the ceremony when my dad gets out, and it was a proud moment to be there up in the beautiful mountains of North Carolina.

Thank you and God bless you. Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Senator Tillis. We appreciate your leadership on this issue.

We turn now to Dr. Brunson for his testimony.

DR. BRUNSON: I'm very grateful to Senator Tillis. He certainly fought for me. I'm very grateful.

I'm also grateful to USCIRF. I want to thank you, Commissioners Sandy Jolley and Kristina Arriaga. They visited me in prison as was mentioned, and also each of them came to one of my

court sessions, and also Commissioner Perkins came to one of the court sessions and escorted us home. So we're very grateful to you. We're very grateful for the work that you did for us, how you fought for us, and how you're fighting for many other people around the world. So thank you very much.

I think you have several experts on Turkey here today. I'm probably the only one who's an expert on Turkish prisons.

[Laughter.]

DR. BRUNSON: But the comments that I make I want to make clear I don't have a problem with the Turkish people. I love Turkey; I love the Turkish people. I do have a problem with their government right now.

My experience in Turkey illustrates and in some way epitomizes how the Turkish government views Christians. The Erdogan regime has stoked an already deep-seated suspicion and animus towards Christians, and one of the ways they did it was through my case. There is still a high degree of

freedom for Christians relative to other Muslim countries in the region, but I am concerned that all the signs point to this changing soon.

So I want to touch on some of the difficulties Christians in Turkey are facing:

First, the Turkish government has accelerated the expulsion of Christian foreigners from Turkey. The most pressing hardship the Turkish church has faced in the last couple of years is the expulsion of foreigners closely involved with the Turkish church.

The Turkish government does not allow Christians to set up education and training programs to develop leaders. And one result of this is a lack of trained pastors. So foreigners have helped to fill this gap.

Over 50 Protestant families have had to leave the country in recent years. I can include myself along with my wife in this group. We were originally arrested for deportation as a threat to national security. Indeed, this is the reason the

Turkish government gives for deporting these peaceful men and women: that they are a, quote, "threat to national security."

A senior pastor, Turkish pastor, wrote to me recently. He said, "This means that Christianity is considered a threat to national security. This is a direct violation of religious freedom as it makes it impossible for Christians to live, to worship, to establish a church in Turkey."

Another Turkish church leader wrote to me a few days ago. He said, "Some Turkish Christians have started to ask, 'After the foreigners are sent away, what will the government do to us?'" This is a good question.

According to some Turkish leaders, there is--I quote--"an expectation of an action from the government against Turkish church leaders. Arrest? Investigations? We don't know."

So I think the accelerated deportation of church leaders is a sign of very dark times to come. Turkey is not there yet, but it is careening

in the wrong direction.

Second, my indictment and trial give an example of how the Turkish government views Christians.

When my indictment came out, it became clear that I had been targeted specifically because of my faith. My crime was "Christianization," acting as--I quote--"an agent of unconventional and psychological warfare under the guise of an evangelical church pastor."

All of our work was intended to fragment Turkey, they said, splitting it into pieces. So basically, the indictment was associating "Christianization" with terrorism and presented Christianity as a danger to Turkey's unity.

The senior judge explicitly said I was not on trial for missionary activity, but much of the supposed "evidence" presented against me as proof of supporting terrorism was our ministry activities. So in the end, I was convicted of supporting terrorism and given a prison sentence.

The Turkish Association of Protestant Churches summarized my trial as follows: Pastor Brunson was subjected to accusations of evangelism, helping refugees, leading worship in several languages, and teaching the faith, all of which are regular activities for any church. It was claimed that he took part in these ministries in order to help the terrorist organization or as part of espionage activities.

I want to underline that less than two months after my release, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which only takes about 30 cases a year--I'm glad they took mine--they concluded that the Turkish authorities targeted and arrested me on the basis of my nationality and my faith.

They confirmed that I was a victim of religious persecution and declared that the appropriate remedy would be to expunge my criminal record and accord me an enforceable right to compensation and other reparations.

They urged the Turkish government to conduct an investigation and take appropriate measures against those who had violated my rights. But of course this would involve the very top of the Turkish government.

Finally, they urged the Turkish government to, I quote, "disseminate the present opinion through all available means and as widely as possible."

So far, the Turkish government has done none of these. The foreign minister still refers to me in public as a spy and calls me Agent Brunson. After the State Department report on religious freedom was published recently, the spokesman for the Turkish Foreign Ministry insisted that, I quote, "Pastor Brunson was convicted because of his affiliation with terrorism, not because of his faith."

This is simply not true. I know that the Turkish government, especially at the highest levels, knew all along that I was innocent.

Third, government-fed media propaganda has created a very tense atmosphere for Christians. I tasted a bit of this from the media in Turkey: the coverage was vile. They said I was a terrorist, anti-Turkish, the head of the CIA in the Middle East, wanted to overturn the Turkish government and establish a Christian state by force.

They called me Terrorist Priest; Spy Priest; Dark Priest. My favorite was they called me Rambo Priest. Yes.

They ensured that the Turkish public thought of me as dangerous, evil, a traitor, and because of this I was despised and hated. And it hasn't stopped. When a gunman killed 50 people in a mosque in New Zealand in March of 2019 of this year, Turkish media suggested that I was the only who had given the killer his orders.

So this is the new normal in Turkey. The Turkish media--behind which stands the Turkish government--I want to emphasize that--they used me to paint a public image of Christians as traitors,

as terrorists and enemies of Turkey when nothing could be further from the truth.

So this deliberate propaganda campaign was intended to reinforce and heighten a negative image of Christians in the general population. The result has been a significant rise in hate speech against Christians, and by this, I mean incitements, threats, and dangerous slander. And in Turkey this is very, very dangerous because it has led to violence in the past.

I want to read briefly what the Turkish Association of Protestant Churches in their 2018 report said about this:

"There was a significant increase in public hate speech designed to incite the public to hatred of Protestants and in written or verbal hate attacks on Protestants and Protestant churches purely due to their beliefs. Even more concerning, there was an increased coupling together of churches and terror organizations in news reports without any evidence of substantiation."

So the conditions have been created so that when the church is persecuted, and I think it will be, when there is violence against Christians, most Turks will now say, "yes, they deserve it."

So I want to conclude by saying my wife and I--Norine and I--are very proud of the small but brave Turkish church that continues to stand for their faith in an openly hostile environment.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Dr. Brunson, and thank you for being here this morning.

We have a few questions that we would like to ask you based on your testimony. Let me ask you this. In your opinion, based on the charges against you, is Turkey using the guise of fighting terrorism to crack down on religious minorities, in your case Christianity, or do they see Christianity and other religions as terrorism? I think there's a unique distinction there.

In your opinion, which is it?

DR. BRUNSON: I think that there is a lot of suspicion of Christians, and this government has

really stoked it, and--yeah, that's a difficult question, to make that fine distinction.

They obviously are using--the government is using--the after coup--the conditions--to crack down on a lot of people and so far it hasn't included Christians that much. I want to emphasize there is a high degree of freedom compared to other places in the Middle East. However, the signs are negative just like the storm clouds are gathering.

And I think there are a number of people in the Turkish church who as they see especially a lot of the foreigners, foreign Christians, being expelled from the country, that they are very concerned about what's going to happen to them. So the government is using the situation they have to their advantage. Yes.

CHAIR PERKINS: Vice Chair.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you so much, Pastor Brunson, for giving your time to be with us today and for your testimony.

I know that it is not easy to go back and

relive very difficult situations. But in thinking about your time in Turkey, there for 23 years, I'm sure there are many wonderful memories of Turkish people that you met as you built faith throughout that country.

So my question to you is: do you believe that part of the fear perhaps at the highest political level is due to the growth of Christianity, to maybe the numbers of people there leaning toward Christianity? Do you believe-- because obviously this trajectory of trending very badly is increasing--so I guess my question is, is it because Christianity is growing in the country or what do you sort of pinpoint this turnabout in such a strong way?

DR. BRUNSON: So President Erdogan speaking in the context of my imprisonment and the difficulties that then resulted with the United States over it said publicly to be a Turk is to be a Muslim. And so this is the way that they see things often.

So I don't think--obviously Christians are not a threat to the Turkish government in any way. We often say we expect Christians to be very good citizens, to pay their taxes, to obey the law, and they tend to be very generous and loving people. So they're not a threat at all. But they're viewed as being if someone has that mentality--to be a Turk is to be a Muslim--then if one leaves Islam and becomes a Christian, then they will be seen as traitors. So this has been one of the problems.

So I don't think that the church is in any way a threat, and in fact, the church is very small. There are, when we look at the Protestant population, there are about 6,000 Turks who have become Christians from a Muslim background. That's 6,000 out of 83 million people. So it's quite a small group. So they're not a threat at all.

But we do see many more people, interestingly--this is interesting to me as someone who is starting churches in Turkey--is that because I think of the crackdown of the difficult

conditions in Turkey right now, more and more people are showing an interest in the Bible and in visiting a church and asking questions about Christianity.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Commissioner Arriaga.

COMMISSIONER ARRIAGA: Thank you so much.

One question that we often discuss as commissioners is how can we incentivize places like Turkey to respect religious freedom and what kind of advocacy is best for people who are being held in prison and detained like you were?

Do you think it's important for the U.S. government to continue to make statements in favor of religious freedom in Turkey? Was the USCIRF advocacy while you were in prison helpful? We find in some places it's helpful and in some places being attached to a U.S. government official visit is not helpful.

And what kind of recommendations would you make the President and the State Department and

Congress regarding religious freedom in Turkey?

DR. BRUNSON: I think one could write a book about that. That's a very long question.

COMMISSIONER ARRIAGA: And I should say you are writing a book, and it is coming out October 15. So--

DR. BRUNSON: I am very grateful that the United States government became involved, and I don't think that I would have been released if the U.S. government had not been involved. So the U.S. government took unprecedented steps that led to my release--imposing sanctions and many--USCIRF was involved. A number of others were involved in bringing this pressure. So I am very grateful for it.

It took unprecedented steps because the Turkish government was acting in an unprecedented way with hostage diplomacy. So I, I think there should be more pressure from the United States government as long as we have areas of leverage, and I think of the U.S. as being the most powerful

but also the wealthiest country in the world, and I would like to see the government using the many means of leverage that it has to apply pressure to advocate for religious freedom. Yes.

CHAIR PERKINS: Dr. Brunson, following up to that question, I know you remain in contact with churches in Turkey, and I'm not asking for disclosure of any names or institutions, but based upon that engagement by the United States government at the highest levels, what has been the broader effect of that in Turkey for other religious minorities, including evangelicals and Christians?

DR. BRUNSON: I think it's very important to have that engagement, and I think one of the things that prisoners of conscience, or prisoners who are being persecuted because of their faith, they want to know that people outside are engaged, that they're praying if they're believers, but also that at least they're aware and speaking out.

So I don't know how effective all of these

things will be, but for the people who are experiencing persecution, they're very important even if they don't lead to a direct result.

CHAIR PERKINS: Vice Chair Manchin.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Just to carry that another step further, so we talk about the religious persecution and the strength that to be Turkish is to be a Muslim, so do you see the same hostility toward Greeks and Armenians in the country now?

Do you just see a rising force against anyone and anything that is not Turkish and Muslim? Is that kind of the key component?

DR. BRUNSON: Obviously, there's a long history to this that informs what's happening now, but I think this, this, the Erdogan regime, is especially hostile. Many Turks, obviously as I said, there's suspicion; there is that identity as a Muslim for most Turks.

But this regime has really stoked it, and so, yes, I think that minority groups, the

historic, historically Christian groups in Turkey, like the Armenians or other orthodox, are--they feel the tension. I know more about what's happening in the Protestant churches because those are the people I'm involved with mostly. But there is tension.

I think there's more growing now because of the regime, and they have an explicitly Islamist agenda, and Turkey is actually--the government of Turkey is becoming an exporter of radical Islam.

CHAIR PERKINS: Commissioner Arriaga.

COMMISSIONER ARRIAGA: Oh, please go ahead. I think we have five minutes.

CHAIR PERKINS: One final question for you, Dr. Brunson.

The use of--you touched on this in your testimony, but I would like to highlight it further, and that is the use of hate speech laws and what we see happening in Turkey, is that heightening the--as you mentioned--the--raising it to a level where people feel comfortable in moving

against religious minorities?

Is the government in its policies really in many ways drawing a bulls-eye on religious minorities?

DR. BRUNSON: They are. And I think that they're, in my case, I think that there was a deliberate--they did this deliberately. It was a propaganda campaign. I believe that they were using my case, and a lot of the media attention that came from leaks from the government, and it was, most of the media is, is, well, it's very influenced by the government. Let me say that.

And it was a very deliberate campaign. So I think that it--hate speech because of how we use it in American context, you know, we think of it differently--the hate speech going on there or the very negative portrayal of Christians in Turkey by the media is very, very dangerous because it has led to--there is a history of violence, and there are many people who, it's not just religion. It's inside--because the Turkish identity is so wrapped

up with Islam, when people are seen as a threat to--there's a lot of nationalism that is mixed with Islam in Turkey, and when Christians are identified as traitors, as people who are maybe anti-Turkish even, who have betrayed their own country, then that is a very powerful thing in Turkey.

And so it can very easily lead to violence against Christians or anybody who is identified in that way.

CHAIR PERKINS: Dr. Brunson, again, we want to thank you for coming here today to testify on this panel as we look at religious freedom in Turkey and continue to focus on that country as a country that creates us great concern as I know it does you. So thank you for being here today.

DR. BRUNSON: I want to end with saying, again, I love Turkey, I love the Turkish people, and I want there to be freedom for everyone in Turkey to choose whatever path they want to follow.

So my criticisms are more of the Turkish government and the environment they've created.

CHAIR PERKINS: The record certainly reflects that, both in your oral testimony and also your actions toward Turkey and the Turkish people. And we appreciate you representing America well.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: I would like to invite our second panel to come to the table. I will introduce each of them. I'll introduce all of them together, and then they will each testify as their areas of expertise as it pertains to Turkey and religious freedom.

Mustafa Akyol is a Senior Fellow at Cato Institute Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity where he focuses on the intersection of public policy, Islam and modernity.

A Turkish journalist and author, he is a regular contributing opinion writer for the New York Times, now going back to 2013, and has been a regular opinion columnist for several Turkish publications.

He is the author of Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty that was praised by The Financial Times as "a forthright and elegant Muslim defense of freedom."

Over the past two decades, his articles have also appeared in a wide range of other publications, and his TED talk on "Faith versus Tradition in Islam" has been watched by more than a million viewers. Make that a million and one. I watched it last night.

[Laughter.]

CHAIR PERKINS: He studied political science and history in Istanbul, Turkey.

Lisel Hintz works at the intersection of identity in politics and foreign policy. She is particularly interested in how domestic identity struggles, how they spill over to shape and be shaped by international affairs. Her regional focus is on Turkey and its relations with Europe and the Middle East.

She has spoken and written widely on

Turkey and the EU and Turkey-Syria relations, particularly on the refugee crisis, the Kurdish question and how she terms Ottoman Islamism shaped Turkey's aggressive policies abroad, which I'm eager to hear about, as well as its authoritarian turn back home.

She teaches courses on psychological approaches to foreign policy decision-making and European social movements.

Aykan Erdemir is a Senior Fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. He is a former member of the Turkish Parliament. We appreciate him being here with us today.

He served in the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee, the EU Harmonization Committee, and the Ad Hoc Parliamentary Committee on the IT Sector and the Internet.

As an outspoken defender of pluralism, minority rights, and religious freedoms in the Middle East, Aykan has been at the forefront of the struggle against religious persecution, hate

crimes, and hate speech in Turkey.

He is a founding member of the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief and a drafter of and a signatory to the Oslo Charter for Freedom of Religion or Belief, as well as a signatory legislator to the London Declaration on Combating Antisemitism.

We welcome our entire panel. Grateful for you being here today, and we will begin with Mustafa.

MR. AKYOL: Thank you, sir, and thanks for having me speak to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

If I were going to speak about freedom in Turkey in general, I would say probably the gravest area is freedom of speech. We have what I call one of the most rigid blasphemy laws in the world. It's not about insulting God, or a prophet; it's about insulting the president. And more than 60,000 people have been prosecuted for that over

the past five years, showing the mood in the country.

Religious freedom, of course, has--on the matter of religious freedom, of course there are big problems as well. But just to bring some nuance, there are some positive things to note as well. The Great Synagogue of Edirne was opened a few years ago by the government--restored. The Bulgarian Church in Istanbul was recently opened. And compared to, yes, other countries in the region, some of which even don't allow the church to exist--like Saudi Arabia--Turkey still looks like a beacon of heaven compared to those.

However, there are great problems, and I'll try to explain a little bit from a political angle what those problems are and where this may go.

Many of the religious freedom problems in Turkey come from actually the foundation of the republic itself. It might be quite controversial to think that way, but actually in the late 19th

century, in the Ottoman Empire, Christian communities in Turkey had more rights like the Halki Seminary of the Ecumenical Patriarchate was opened under the blessings of the Ottoman Empire.

Many confiscations that have taken place on non-Muslim minorities and their properties have taken place in the republican era compared to the Ottoman Empire because the Ottoman Empire was pluralistic. It dramatically collapsed and a lot of terrible things happened during that collapse. What emerged was republics in the region with a paranoid ethno-nationalist mind-set. That is obviously Turkey.

I should say that similar trends can be seen in Greece because some of the religious freedom problems in Turkey are mirrored in Greece like interfering in the local non--in that case--Turkish community, in the Turkish case, Christian community, not allowing them to have their elections, for example.

Now, this nationalism was secular, but

also it was what I call an "illiberal secularism," which had actually some negative impacts on the Sunni population as well.

And it was a monolithic idea of a nation. So the nation is defined by Sunni Turks. Who is not a Sunni Turk had to be somehow less pronounced. So Alevis could not have their houses of worship, which we call cemevi, and Christians were officially recognized as minorities, but certainly their institutions were not recognized as legal entities, and I think that's the biggest problem structurally speaking in Turkey.

Now, the interesting thing is that when the AKP government, the government which was not just led by Erdogan but a broader team of people, but Erdogan was the prime minister, came, they actually promised to change all this, and they clinged on to the European Union accession process. They did some helpful reforms for Christians as well.

However, the more they stayed in power,

power corrupted, power made paranoid, power made more authoritarian. And that reformism era in Turkish history, which was let's say the first decade of AKP, was gradually replaced by a more paranoid world view.

And that paranoid world view basically assumes Turkey is surrounded by enemies; there are threats everywhere. Especially there are western conspiracies in Turkey. Those conspiracies act with local agents, and whomever those local agents are perceived, which can range from innocent people, all kinds of innocent people, ranging from Pastor Brunson to George Soros to liberals to any critic of the government, can be targeted.

I should say the biggest criteria here is not whether being Christian or Muslim. The biggest criteria is whether you're pro-government or not. If you are pro-government, you can be an atheist in Turkey and you'll be perfect. You can be a public Armenian intellectual, you can rise up to the-- there are a few people like that.

So, but Christians by definition, especially Protestants, especially missionaries who have ties with the West, are seen as somehow fifth columns. And I should note that there has been a very interesting Russian propaganda pumping that, which was devoured by the Western media, Turkish media. There has been news after the coup created by Russian websites saying that the Patriarchate was behind the coup, and Turkish newspapers jumped into that because--but, you know, Turkey is also being a bit manipulated here in this very paranoid nationalism by some other actors in the scene who have their own, own goals.

Now, I want to say one thing about the Gulen affair, which is also part of the purge after the coup. This is a complicated issue. The followers of Fethullah Gulen, a U.S.-based cleric, has been Turkey's biggest religious community, and a religious community doesn't have any problem if it's about NGOs, charities and media, and so on and so forth, and that part of the Gulen community was

not a problem.

However, the Gulen community also had a strategy of infiltrating government institutions, especially the police, the military, the judiciary, to create a state within the state and ultimately even take over the bureaucracy.

And I should say that this is not just a conspiracy theory by the current government; it is I think a fact established by many independent observers. All opposition parties also agree that there's a problem here, and that covert side of I think Gulen community is responsible--I'm saying in not a legal sense but from a political observer point of view--for a lot of series of crimes, like wiretapping opponents, creating fake documents to put people in jail, stealing exam questions to rise and make their people rise in the bureaucracy, and these are now attested by people who broke from the group.

And I think there are very strong grounds to think that this group was also, had the main, at

least, was the main component behind the coup attempt.

So that I think should be acknowledged that there's a serious case here. However, the government did two huge mistakes after the coup, with wrath and vengeance. First of all, instead of focusing on the covert side of the group, it defined the whole group as a terrorist group, which made school teachers terrorists, which I think is unacceptable.

Then it started to jump from that into anybody who sounds like a Gulenist, anybody who speaks about interfaith dialogue, anybody who somehow was critical of the government, and who has seen and had lunch with someone, with the Gulens, was defined as a crypto Gulenist. So it turned into a really scary witch hunt, which is the biggest, I think, human rights problem in Turkey right now. It's still going on.

I think the U.S. government can help Turkey by acknowledging that, yes, it has some

serious security considerations regarding this covert side of the Gulen group, regarding the Kurdish insurgency. Yes, Turkey has reasons to feel threatened, but those threats should be countered within the rule of law and not turning everything into a witch hunt.

So these are the basic realities I would say politically, and I should finally say that there are discussions in the West about the future of Turkey, where it is going. We should try to keep it as much as possible within the sphere of the free world, and I see no wisdom in catalyzing the drag towards an alliance with Russia or the most less free countries in the world.

Some people think that this is going to happen inevitably. I think it's not yet clear where Turkey will end up. This is certainly an extraordinary political era with revolutionary zeal. Religious people are coming back and taking their country from the seculars. That's the kind of mentality. This zeal can take Turkey to darker,

darker, darker places, or at some point, it might calm down a little bit and Turkey might ultimately head to a brighter future.

And I think last Sunday with the elections in Istanbul, we saw that there's at least a chance for that.

Thank you so much.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Mustafa.

We will hold our questions until we've heard from the whole panel.

Ms. Hintz, thank you for being here, and we look forward to hearing from you. Please proceed.

DR. HINTZ: Thank you so much. Thank you to USCIRF for inviting me to talk on these issues, which are extremely important and certainly under a lot of threat now.

I just want to apologize in advance. If you see my fidgeting, I recently had hamstring surgery so if I'm fidgeting, that's what I'm doing. But I'm extremely happy to be here so thank you for

having me.

The basic three themes that I'd like to touch on very briefly, and then we can open it up for questions later, are sort of how does the AKP's, the Justice and Development Party, specific understanding of Turkish national identity--that is what does it mean to be Turkish--how that differs from other political parties, other civil society groups, other citizens and so forth? How that understanding of identity has translated into discrimination and violence not just through formal legal measures. My colleague Aykan is going to speak about that. I have the much easier task of sort of speaking about it a bit more generally, but through sort of informal discursive ways.

What is shown on television? What religious or political leaders are saying? How they are perhaps informally encouraging their supporters to take vengeance against those that do not support them and so forth? Because I think that discursive action is really important as well.

It's more difficult to quantify and measure, but I think it's really important.

And then third, how does Turkey's foreign policy and sort of the blow back from that particularly against Israel affect Jews in Turkey? When there's an extraordinarily heightened amount of rhetoric surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, how that affects Jews in Turkey, how that threatens their own situation, how we've actually seen quite a lot of immigration of Turkish Jews to Israel, and how specifically that tends to center around elections when nationalist rhetoric is valued and can be used to whip up domestic support.

So very briefly, the understanding of national identity held by the Justice and Development Party, in general, I qualify as Ottoman Islamism, as you mentioned. In the book that I published, I have four understandings of Turkish identity: Republican nationalism, which we saw sort of more prominently throughout the secular military-led years; Ottoman Islamism of the AKP;

Pan-Turkic nationalism, which is sort of an ethnic understanding of identity. That's held mostly by the Nationalist Action Party, the Great Union Party. And Western liberalism, which we see among, for example, the People's Democratic Party and other sort of civil society organizations in Turkey.

So what does it mean to have an Ottoman Islamist understanding of Turkish identity? It fundamentally differs from those held by, as I said, previous administrations. To be a good Turk, as has been briefly mentioned, you need to be not just a Muslim, you need to be a Sunni Muslim, and I would go further. You need to be a pious Sunni Muslim.

So there are millions of Turks in Turkey who are Sunni Muslims but who do not pray regularly, who do not fast, who drink alcohol and so forth.

But for the AKP, you are only in the in group, you are only one of us, you are only part of

our nation if you are a pious Sunni Muslim, I would say who respects patriarchal authority, and who believes that Turkey's--because this has foreign policy implications as well--that Turkey's foreign policy should be centered around being the Sunni Muslim leader in the region, the protector of Muslims in the region.

And as I'm going to talk about in the case of Israel, that has very serious consequences for Turks back home. So I sort of break down identity--I have a whole framework that I come up with. But this idea of constitutive norms and what does it mean to be part of this in group. Automatically creates out groups. And so if you are an Alevi, which is--of course, there's a lot of dispute among Alevis themselves--are they Muslim? Are they sort of syncretic Shia Muslims? Are they a religion but not part of Islam? Are they not religious at all? Is it more of a cultural understanding?

That's actually one of the difficulties of Alevi groups in unifying is that they have a lot of

disputes amongst themselves. But they are for the AKP, for those who have this Ottoman Islamist understanding of identity, heretics.

Not only are they an out group, but they are an out group to be despised, and so there is a lot of--there have been violent attacks against Alevis in the past by pious Sunni conservative individuals. When the AKP named the bridge the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge, was celebrating the acts of the Ottoman Sultan who had massacred thousands of Alevis. So this was seen as insulting by Alevis.

So, again, it's not just, you know, do they get funding from the government? Are they allowed to, you know, are their electricity bills paid by the government, and so forth, which is a debate right now, but it's also what are these symbolic gestures that the government is celebrating that is basically telling them you don't belong?

So I think a lot of that is quite

important. For example, in a test in a religious education institute in Van, in the southeast province of Van in 2015, there was a test that said what is the incorrect way of performing namaz, that is to pray? And they had three pictures of a small boy praying in the traditional Sunni fashion, and then they had a picture of Ali Ismail Korkmaz, who was an Alevi who was killed. He was beaten to death during the Gezi protests. And so this is what students are supposed to check off as incorrectly being a Muslim.

So I think it's these kinds of symbolic and discursive ways of communicating to children even that if you are part of this group, you don't belong. Same with Caferis (Jafaris), same with other Shia Muslim groups in Turkey as well.

And then, of course, we've heard about Christians. I want to talk a little bit about the situation of Jews as well. But I do think it's important to kind of think about the ways in which, particularly around elections, as I said, President

Erdogan will use kind of offhand remarks, even epithets sometimes. He'll say, excuse me, they've even called me Armenian, like God forbid someone should call you Armenian. He's used anti-Semitic epithets.

So there's a sense that this is a very visceral internal sort of understanding of us versus them, and who is in the in group. And again, this is picked up by a lot of his supporters. I think it's important to emphasize the charismatic, not just charismatic legitimacy in the political science sense, but charismatic effect that Erdogan himself has amongst his, his very loyal followers, you know, that call him "their leader," "their captain," and so forth, using very reverential terms, such that they will carry out what they believe his will to be.

So you see attacks on art galleries that are serving alcohol outside, where it's perfectly legal to do so. There's nothing on the books that says you can't. But they say that's, that's

"haram." That's something we don't do.

So again it's those non-institutional forms of violence and discrimination and language that I think are really important to point to.

Particularly in the Turkey-Israeli foreign policy case, as I said, one of the main components of having an Ottoman Islamist understanding of Turkish identity is that Turkey should be--it hasn't been up until the AKP comes into power because those Republican nationalists wanted to stay away from the Middle East and not have anything to do with it. They saw it as backward and then something they didn't want to get entangled with.

But for the AKP, there's an opportunity to claim the role of Turkey having been the former home of the caliphate and the sultanates--the Ottoman caliphate and sultanate, I should say--as the protector of Muslims. And so this is particularly the case with Palestinians, and Erdogan will talk at length about Palestinians.

There are numerous aid organizations that are giving aid to Muslims. So speaking if there are positives about the AKP, there certainly has been an immense amount of aid that goes to Sunni Muslim groups, both within Turkey and abroad, and that's certainly welcome.

But as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has come to be seen so zero sum, with Turkey as the protector of the Palestinians, the rhetoric against Israel has become incredibly aggressive, hostile and quite polarized.

Now foreign policy and diplomacy may go on. Economic and intelligence cooperation may go on. But at the rhetorical level, there's an immense amount of hatred amongst Erdogan's loyal followers. I'll give you a very brief example before I finish. In the 2014 Israel bombing attacks against Gaza--this was in July 2014--I happened to be doing a crossword puzzle, as one does when one is in Southwest Turkey on vacation, and the crossword puzzle was, the clue was we are

searching for you, and the answer was Hitler.

And there was an extraordinarily anti-Semitic wave of top AKP officials sharing references about how we need Hitler. We need another Hitler and so forth. Not, so that, and by the way, that was a month before his presidential campaign. So there's an element of riling up that nationalist sentiment so you should often look at the timing of these discursive debates. So there's that element.

And, of course, as was mentioned by Mustafa, following the 2016 coup, there were thousands of messages shared on Twitter that this was a Jewish conspiracy, this was all the Jews who are involved in this coup attempt, and so that conspiracy theory mentality that is--and I should say the conspiracy theory mentality and anti-Semitism is not unique to the AKP in Turkey. That has been existing for a long time. But there is a specific anti-Israeli, we need to protect the Palestinians element that happened. So you've seen

attacks. You've seen synagogues burned.

In 2017 alone, 400 Turkish Jews immigrated to Israel, and a lot will, if they're speaking, they don't use their own names. They're terrified. So that also has had a major effect on Jews, particularly within Turkey, just as one example of the connection between foreign policy and religious identity within Turkey.

Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Ms. Hintz.

And now we turn to our final panelist, Mr. Erdemir. Thank you for being here.

MR. ERDEMIR: Mr. Chair and Madam Vice Chair, Madam Commissioner, I would like to thank you and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom for the opportunity to speak at this hearing.

Since I will be talking about some technical legal matters concerning property rights of religious minorities, I would like to read from the text to be concise and accurate.

The Turkish government's restrictions on, and violation of, property rights is one of the key grievances of Turkey's faith communities. The root cause of these grievances is the absence of a regulatory framework that provides full and independent legal status to faith communities in Turkey, which would guarantee them the unhindered right to acquire, own or rent property.

There are various legal entities that faith communities use to mitigate problems caused by their inability to attain legal status. Some faith communities have "minority community foundations," which dates back to the Ottoman era and were registered by the Directorate General of Foundations in 1936.

Others have established various legal entities under the civil code, such as foundations, associations, and even private companies, in order to acquire property in the absence of legal status.

Numerous property grievances of faith communities, including the precarious nature of

their ownership of, and access to, these properties, have proven that none of these alternatives can guarantee the property rights of faith communities in the absence of full and independent legal status.

There are three main areas concerning property rights that are at the core of current grievances and the Turkish government's initiatives to remedy them. I call them the three "R's," restitution, reciprocity and restoration.

Let me begin by restitution. In the Turkish government's efforts to restitute properties to minority community foundations in accordance with the European Union Harmonization Laws of 2003 and the Restitution Decree of 2011 deserve commendation.

The Directorate General of Foundations has reported that between 2003 and 2014, it registered 1,020 properties to religious minority foundations and paid compensation for 21. The gradual, albeit incomplete, restitution of properties previously

expropriated from religious minority communities has been an important step in the right direction.

The 2011 decree is, however, limited in scope and excludes, among others, Roman Catholic and Anglican properties since these communities did not have minority community foundations, as well as Alevi properties, and certain cemeteries.

Even when courts rule for restitution, the implementation can fail. A Greek Orthodox foundation in Bozcaada, for example, has not been able to register 11 of their properties, despite winning a court case in 2014, on the grounds that inspections by the land registry office are incomplete.

Similarly a court decision to reconstitute a prominent Istanbul building to the Armenian Patriarchate in 2017, after a six-year restitution case, was overturned by the High Court of Appeals in 2019.

A specific type of restitution--the allocation of an expropriated property to a faith

community other than the original owners--is a policy that grants rights at the expense of other faith communities. In a project stalled since 2013, the Turkish government recently allocated land and a permit to build a Syriac Christian church in Istanbul, the first church to be built from scratch in the history of the Republic of Turkey.

But the allocated land included a Roman Catholic Cemetery, previously seized by the state, and the move therefore triggered tensions between Roman Catholic and Syrian Christian communities that were only resolved through the intervention of Pope Francis.

My second topic is reciprocity. The policy of reciprocity, which makes the granting of certain minority rights conditional on the granting of similar rights in other countries, is another obstacle preventing restitution or use of properties.

The Turkish government, for example, has

made a commitment to opening the Halki Seminary, the main theology school of the Ecumenical Patriarchate located in Istanbul, in exchange for the Greek government opening the first mosque in Athens.

Similarly, Bulgarian Orthodox Sveti Stefan Church, which President Recep Tayyip Erdogan unveiled on January 7, 2018, after a seven-year restoration project, was reported by Turkey's state-run media to have been, quote, "restored under so-called rules of reciprocity"--end quote--in exchange for Sofia's green light for the restoration of the mosque in Bulgaria's second-largest city, Plovdiv.

The policy of reciprocity makes property rights a conditional right and treats religious minorities as bargaining chips, or hostages, to extract bilateral concessions that serve the Turkish government's specific agendas. Turkey's religious minorities have spoken out against this policy.

In 2006, over 100 members of Turkey's religious minorities signed a joint declaration stating that they are not "hostages."

And my third topic is restoration. Since 2003, the Directorate General of Foundations has allocated funds for the restoration of a number of churches and synagogues. The Directorate has reportedly completed restorations of 19 churches, three synagogues, and one monastery, and has ongoing restoration projects and plans for two churches, two monasteries, one chapel, and one synagogue.

The Directorate's funding, however, often comes with strings attached, as state officials want to have a say as to not only who can perform religious services in restored buildings, but also when. In 2014, for example, the governor of the province of Edirne threatened to turn a restored synagogue into a museum following tensions in Jerusalem.

I would like to end my testimony with five

policy recommendations. One, U.S. lawmakers could organize fact-finding missions to Turkey to investigate and report the state of property rights of faith communities in Turkey and to engage Turkish lawmakers to encourage strengthening those rights by granting full and independent legal status to all faith communities.

Second, the U.S. government, in cooperation with the Council of Europe and the European Union, could urge the Turkish government to pass legislation granting full and independent legal status to all faith communities in Turkey and to take other necessary steps in accordance with the various rulings of the European Court of Human Rights.

Three, the U.S. government can provide additional international development aid to civil society organizations and projects in Turkey that aim to strengthen freedom of religion or belief in general, and property rights of faith communities in particular.

Four, the U.S. can develop programs to host and/or offer refuge to Turkish citizens who are persecuted for their advocacy of freedom of religion or belief, including through "scholars at risk" and "journalists at risk" programs.

And finally, USCIRF has long called for targeted sanctions against violators of religious freedom. In line with USCIRF's recommendation in its 2017 Annual Report that the administration use targeted tools against specific officials, agencies and military units identified as having participated in particularly severe violations of religious freedoms, the U.S could designate entities and individuals responsible for such violations in Turkey.

Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Mr. Erdemir. Thank you to our panelists.

We'll go now to questions. Mustafa, I'll begin. I have a question for you. I actually have a lot of questions, but only time will allow us to

ask a few, and I'm going to resist the temptation to go to the Russia meddling in Turkey, even though we're in this room here.

But let me focus on the issue of you focused on freedom of speech and how that is at risk. Are those two issues synonymous in your mind as the Turkish government approaches freedom of religion and freedom of speech?

MR. AKYOL: They are, I think, because in both areas we see the principle of unlimited government. The government has the right to check everybody; the government has the right to decide who will be the patriarchate of the Armenian church. The government has the right to interpret what you really meant when you wrote that tweet, and you can't prove otherwise.

Like on freedom of speech, I mean the Turkish government will tell you that we have freedom of speech. The only thing we do not allow is terrorist propaganda. But you start to make terrorist propaganda when you say something

critical about the way the government deals with the terrorists like criticizing some human rights violations during the clashes with the Kurdish insurgency. That in itself becomes a terrorist propaganda.

So what we need is a measure that will somehow tell to the authorities that your definition of things are not ultimate, and for that you need independent judiciary, but that's mostly gone. And, unfortunately, I think that is a huge problem since the beginning of the republic, that judiciary has been subservient to whomever is in power.

And that whomever is in power has changed, but that attitude of the judiciary has not been changed. Of course, there are exceptions. There are cases of Turkish constitutional court saying no to the executive, but that has been largely curbed lately in President Erdogan and in the way he reversed the very reforms he accomplished in the first years in power.

I think the fundamental problem, legal problem, in Turkey, that Turkey still doesn't have a constitution in the full sense of the word. Turkey has texts that are called constitution, but they are made by whomever is in power at certain point.

The army makes a constitution, and then some politician gets 52 percent of the votes, and he makes a constitution just for his own advantage. We still haven't had the foundational moment of we the people are diverse, there are different groups, we are all individuals, let's agree on a fundamental text.

Turkey has not had that yet. Tunisia had that. So it's not impossible in that region. I admire the Tunisians for that lately. But Turkey I think has to have to come to a point of there are different groups in this country. Turks themselves are bitterly divided, and I think the non-Muslims are generally having the collateral damage of the fight between these two major Turkish groups of

seculars and conservatives.

And that will be the ultimate solution. And besides the legal problem of this lack of a constitutional design, which would allow the Halki Seminary, which will allow the Ecumenical Patriarchate to have its own legal entity, even Sunni actually groups don't have a legal entity as well. I mean they are certainly getting full blessings from the government right now. But like Naqshbandi, the Sufi orders, they were banned also technically in the beginning of the republic.

So Turkey needs to come to that point, and President Erdogan in his early years promised such a constitutional moment. I think we have to expect the end of the current era for some, to hope something like that.

CHAIR PERKINS: Ms. Hintz, if I could ask you, you made reference to the region and that Turkey is focused on that region and its influence.

What evidence is there that Turkey is exporting this intolerant view, if you will, of

religious minorities or differing religions beyond just the region to maybe other parts of the world like maybe Africa?

DR. HINTZ: Sure. So I think that's a very important question. I would say that the Turkish government through the Diyanet, through the Directorate of Religious Affairs, is involved in cultivating a particular sense of identity among Muslims, particularly among Turkish Muslims, Muslims of Turkish heritage in Kosovo, in Bosnia, in Germany, and in other places as well.

I would not, I know that there are concerns. I know, for example, the German government is very interested in what goes on inside those mosques, what happens in the religious institution buildings and so forth.

I would not go as far as to say that Turkey is exporting radical Islam. I would not say that. I would say that Turkey is trying to cultivate what I would say has to do more with loyalty to its own government. The salaries of the

imams are paid. The construction of the mosque is at least partially paid and so forth.

One of the reasons that the AKP is so active in that in Germany in particular is that there are one-and-a-half million Germans of Turkish origin who are allowed to vote in Turkish elections, not in the local elections that we just saw but in the presidential and general elections, and so when you are at 49, 51 percent tipping point, that becomes an incredibly important source of votes, of loyalty. So there is that to a certain extent.

We also know that the AKP--and it's interesting because this is where Turkey differs from Saudi on a number of different ways--they support different Muslim groups. So Turkey under the AKP has allied itself with the Muslim Brotherhood, has supported Hamas, and so forth, and we know that Saudi, you know, is, of course, distant, has distanced itself from those groups and sees that as completely incorrect way of going

about securing your own national security and exporting it abroad.

We do know that the Turkish government has been involved in supporting jihadi groups in Syria, in providing funds, weapons, and so forth to Al-Nusra, which is an organization that had formerly affiliated with Al-Qaeda. So there is that element of support. That I would call more tactical. I wouldn't say that that has to do with supporting religion; that has to do with trying to, at the time, achieve the ouster of Bashar Assad, whom Erdogan saw as one of his many enemy number ones. They had been good friends. He felt that Assad had betrayed him, and so he decided that Assad had to go, and so he was interested in supporting groups that were against Assad.

So that had not to do with exporting religion but rather having to do with supporting a group that was, that had one of its main focuses as combating Bashar Assad.

So I think it is a bit dangerous to assume

that there are motivations behind a particular policy. I think it really takes investigating what the motivations in each of those particular cases is.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you.

Vice Chair Manchin.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you.

And I sort of pose this question to each of you because I think you come from a different perspective. But Mustafa, you talked about paranoia. That was repeated through your remarks, and then your comments in this answer about the lack of a constitution.

And, Lisel, you talked specifically about the vitriolic rhetoric of this particular president and the hate speech.

And then the reciprocity and the restoration, but the limitations and the restrictions around being able to do that.

As a group that focuses on trying to protect religious freedom around the world, is

there a process, is there something that we can do within this regime, under this president, is there a way for us to advocate in a way that will be supportive and helpful to the cause of religious freedom in Turkey?

MR. AKYOL: Sure. Thank you.

First of all, I agree with Lisel that we can't say Turkey is supporting or exporting militant Islam or jihadism. The government certainly did support jihadi groups in Syria with the hope of toppling Assad, but then even there there was a belated recognition of that, oh, these are also now problems for us so Turkey started fighting ISIS.

So there was a blindness about just toppling Assad, but I don't think Turkey is supporting that sort of terrorist Islam.

What is Turkey promoting is a nationalist Islam that is not violent at all, but not always very liberal, you know, in its outlook.

Regarding what the U.S. government can do,

I'm in favor of engagement. Pastor Brunson, I think, was--he was unjustly imprisoned, but his release was thanks to engagement, some transactional engagement, some way of engagement. But if I were in a position of authority speaking to President Erdogan, I would remind him his early years. He was actually criticizing all these excesses in Turkey, all these distrusts towards minorities.

There was a time that President Erdogan was criticizing the fascist mentality of the state. There was a time he declared we are not a country surrounded by enemies anymore. We're confident, and so on and so forth.

He was new, and he was seeing there were a lot of problems in the establishment, and he was promising change, and so on and so forth. I would criticize him for becoming exactly what he used to criticize, and I think, I think Turkish--one, I think, frustration that I know that there is in Ankara that some of the wiser people in Ankara are

actually realizing that, yes, Turkey has big problems right now, but they are also saying we have some legitimate concerns that are not being heard.

So I think a more nuanced attitude in some issues will be helpful. I think that is partly the, in part, the Turkish concern about U.S. support for the Syrian Kurdish militia. It was certainly support for defeating ISIS, and it has its own strategic logic to it. I understand that.

But from the perspective of not just President Erdogan and his ruling party but from all other Turkish political groups except the HDP, this was supporting the PKK because that Kurdish militia was not any Kurdish militia; it was ideologically affiliated with the PKK, which is Turkey's biggest, you know, headache since 1984.

I would, at least, you know, from a U.S. government standpoint understand that there's a real legitimate concern here, then try to bring a bigger solution to this. I mean it's not a

religious freedom problem per se, but since Turkey's threat perceptions are directly influencing its attitude towards issues relating to religious freedom, I would have a conversation where I would urge the Turkish government to uphold freedom and actually honor some of the early promises it had.

And I would say, okay, we understand you and you have concerns, and let's speak about those concerns as well.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you.

MR. AKYOL: Thank you.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Lisel.

DR. HINTZ: Thank you, Vice Chair.

I appreciated that you opened your question by sort of focusing on this discursive role or kind of informal ways that these us versus them dynamics are manifesting themselves.

And I guess in that case, I would slightly differ a bit from my colleague and say that I think that part of what Turkey is exporting can be

violent. If you look at some of the even informal groups in Germany, so in addition to the Diyanet and the mosques that they're opening, the Milli Gorus, the National Outlook Movement, has a headquarters in Cologne, which is the institutionalization of the religious political tradition that the AKP come out of.

But other than that, you have sort of informal civil society groups that have carried out violent actions against Kurds and also against Armenians. Specifically in European countries when there is an Armenian genocide recognition bill on the table, there are civil society groups that sort of feel themselves tasked to protest against, sometimes violently protest against, sometimes carry out violence against those. I know of instances of that in Germany.

So one of my concerns is that both at home and abroad, there is a subtle deputization of citizens, particularly following the coup attempt, whereby Erdogan kind of said take it in your own

hands. Those who carried out violence during that pushing back the coup attempt were sort of immune from prosecution for doing so.

So there's almost a deputization of taking the law into your own hands that has been intimated as something that is acceptable, and I know that it's very difficult to quantify that and measure that, and so in recommendations, one of the things I would be saying is listen more to people who are not just, you know, crunching the numbers but are watching these debates and what are people saying on television.

You know, you'll have pro-government AKP, you know, talking heads on television saying, well, you know, here's a couple of these Gulenist people abroad. I wonder if something happened to them, what would happen, or, you know, similarly with other non-AKP groups as well, and these civil society groups sometimes feel as though they need to take that into their hands.

In terms of other recommendations, this

gets very tricky. And I think my recommendation actually doesn't sound very necessarily positive or constructive, but at this point, the polarization between U.S.-Turkey relations on everything from the S-400s to the YPG to Gulen to so many other issues is so tense, and the fact that the Turkish government blames foreign entities for any kind of disruption, whether it's the Gezi protests or it's the lira crisis, and it's not always, it's often when it's saying external nefarious forces, it's referring to Jewish groups, but it's also referring to the U.S. specifically.

And so any kind of USAID or any kind of U.S.-led encouragement to change a policy position is going to be looked on with that same kind of suspicion I think is correct, that same kind of threat of insurrection or of threatening to overthrow the AKP. So I would encourage the U.S. to try to speak through intermediaries, to try to speak through European countries that may have cultivated better relations with Turkey, speak with

other countries, try to get them to advocate those kinds of positions because right now any kind of recommendation from the U.S. looks like a conspiracy theory, looks--I'm being a bit loose with my language there, but it is viewed with suspicion, and so if there's a way to work with other intermediary countries that have other relationships, better relationships with Turkey, that is how I would see that policy best advocated.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you.

Aykan.

MR. ERDEMIR: Madam Vice Chair, I do believe that USCIRF and United States government and Turkey's other NATO allies and international organizations can play a positive role in strengthening religious freedoms in Turkey. I base my assessment on the fact that when we take a look at the Turkish government's track record, it has been shaped more out of diplomatic concerns than out of respect for the rights and freedoms of its own citizens.

I would like to give you a couple of examples. For example, the 2003 Harmonization Laws that paved the way for the restitution of minority properties in Turkey was out of Turkey's European Union accession process, was a result of Turkey's European Union accession process.

So it was less out of a concern for the rights of Turkey's religious minorities--

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Right.

MR. ERDEMIR: --but more out of a concern for what Brussels would think and how it would reflect on it. Or, for example, the opening of the Bulgarian Orthodox church in Istanbul by President Erdogan himself coincided with the beginning of Bulgaria's term presidency in the European Union so it was, again, an act of goodwill to the term president of the European Union or--these are some positive incentives, but there could be also disincentives.

For example, Pastor Andrew Brunson, his release unfortunately had nothing to do with due

process and everything to do with the Global Magnitsky sanctions issued against two Turkish ministers.

Similarly, Turkey's extremely slow and painful recognition of the Alevi children's rights not to be exposed to Sunni indoctrination in compulsive religious classes did not come out of the Turkish government's respect for the rights and freedoms of Alevi children, but it was more a result of a very long and slow painful process through the European Court of Human Rights where successive convictions of the Turkish state, rulings against the Turkish state, forced the Turkish government to take small steps, unwillingly, but in the right direction.

So I would like to conclude by saying that with the right and balanced mix of incentives and disincentives even the current Turkish government can take maybe unwilling but nevertheless steps in the right direction. Again, I would like to emphasize, I would like to reiterate what Dr. Hintz

said, and reiterate the importance of trans-Atlantic cooperation.

U.S. policy has been most effective vis-a-vis Turkey when closely coordinated with the European Union. Turkey is an accession country still to the European Union. Turkey is a long-time member of the Council of Europe. So there are various instruments at the disposal of U.S. policymakers, and I would strongly recommend using those.

Thank you.

VICE CHAIR MANCHIN: Thank you. Very helpful. Thank you.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you.

I have a lot of questions I'd love to ask, but lest we all have to go to therapy with Dr. Hintz, we will wrap up here, but I want to yield to my colleague, Commissioner Arriaga, to ask the final question, and then I will wrap us up.

COMMISSIONER ARRIAGA: Thank you.

Dr. Erdemir, if I may, you spoke at length

about issues associated with property rights, which I think makes it institutionalized discrimination rather than just persecution of the groups that are not afforded rights.

How can we speak to institutionalized discrimination particularly when it comes to the fate of these religious groups? How can we address that?

Dr. Hintz was also talking about societal anti-Semitism. Something that strikes me as horrible is that there has been a television series, "The Last Emperor," that has essentially recreated Turkish history in order to blame the Jews for all sorts of bad things.

What are measures that the United States government can specifically take to eradicate that kind of institutional discrimination against minority groups?

MR. ERDEMIR: Madam Commissioner, thank you for the question. It's a very difficult question because this is really an issue that spans

decades, and again possibly the United States alone could have quite little if it acts unilaterally.

This does require both a transnational engagement and also a multi-sector engagement, you know, not just state-to-state or multilateral interaction. It also requires people-to-people diplomacy as well as public diplomacy. And the reason is we have seen a systematic inculcation of hate through state-funded or pro-government media, through the education system, and even worse, uttered by the highest ranking officials in the country.

So this has created a toxic environment concerning Turkey's religious minorities, particularly Jews and Christians, but also involving Muslim minorities, including the Alevis.

Now given this toxic climate and given the fact that Turkey, the Turkish government thinks more in terms of special privileges granted to subordinates rather than equal citizenship rights granted to citizens, it becomes very difficult to

remedy these issues because ultimately a lot of the either restitution issues or other religious freedom issues depend on the discretionary authority of lower level bureaucrats or courts.

And every time we are faced with a discretionary decision on these crucial issues, given the toxic climate, given the environment of hate and paranoia, it is highly unlikely for Turkey's vulnerable faith communities to expect a favorable decision, and even when such favorable decisions come, it is my assessment that such decisions come as a benevolence, out of benevolent generosity of overlords.

They often come in exchange or waiting for the gratitude of the minority communities which are being tolerated. So the key issue is how to transform this neo-Ottoman logic of toleration of subordinates or granting of benevolent gifts to underlings to an understanding of a secular Turkish republic of equal citizens.

And when it comes to that, United States

has been, I know has been funding various initiatives in Turkey, ranging all the way from supporting civil society to supporting notions of checks and balances. I think such a holistic approach also becomes very important because ultimately I think it's very difficult to isolate religious freedom issues in Turkey, meaning as long as Turkey continues on this trajectory of authoritarianism and one-man-rule, I do have very little hopes just to remedy religious freedom issues through bilateral U.S.-Turkish or multilateral interaction with Turkey.

CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you very much. I again want to thank our panel. This has been very informative and enlightening, and I think it underscores the complexity of this issue of religious freedom.

Of course our mission at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is to focus on that lane. We often see, as was testified here today, that it's intertwined with other

issues. Our mission is to focus on that strand of that fundamental human right of the freedom to believe, and we thank you for your recommendations that we can take and mesh with our findings in addition to what we have heard here today as we counsel with our government officials to help speak for the people in Turkey that they might enjoy greater freedoms, but also what happens in Turkey, Turkey is an influential country in that region of the world, and Mustafa, as you spoke to, it would be great to keep them on this side of the line, and of course, we would like to also see them being good actors when it comes to the freedom of speech and the freedom of religion.

So I want to thank all of those who have joined us today for this hearing, those watching online, and again want to thank Senator Tillis for making arrangements for us to have this room.

Thank you all for being here today.

[Whereupon, at 12:08 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]